Prospect

Nick Land: the Alt-writer

My PhD supervisor turned out to be satan

By Nicholas Blincoe May 18, 2017

Nick Land (YouTube still)

It is quite something to discover, a quarter of a century too late, that your old PhD supervisor is satan. I was a 24-year-old research student at Warwick when I met Nick Land. He was just four years older and brilliant, if remarkably immature even by my twenty-something standards. He disappeared around the turn of the century, landing in Shanghai, and I heard nothing more of him for years. I never expected him to resurface as one of a select group of bloggers who informs the worldview of Steve Bannon—profiled in this month's *Prospect*—and the direction of the Donald Trump White House. An article in the *Atlantic* in February traced the evolution of the alt-right back to a circle known as NRx, or neo-reactionaries, that includes Nick alongside others with spooky death metal handles like Mencius Moldbug.

Nick was not cut out for teaching. When I knocked on his office door there would be a frantic clatter as he hid his dope-smoking paraphernalia, and a breathless squeak of "Who is it?" He was stoned and his office stunk. But he radiated an excitement that made philosophy fun, throwing out offhand remarks that brought fresh illumination to many problems. He preferred his comments to be as outlandish as possible. He was a huge fan of Nietzsche and when I admitted I loathed wading through all his stuff about dwarves and hermits, Nick was aghast. He saw Nietzsche as blackly comic, satirical and subversive, and not at all a lot of Tolkien crap.

Every month staff would give readings from work-in-progress. Nick's first talk was entitled: "Putting the Rat back Into Rationality," in which he argued that, rather than seeing death as an event that happened at a particular time to an individual, we should look at it from the perspectives of the rats carrying the Black Death into Europe; that is, as a world-encircling swarm, without any specific coordinates, or any sense of individuation. An older professor tried to get his head round this idea: "How might we locate this description within human experience?" he asked. Nick told him that human experience was, of course, worthy of study, but only as much as, say, the experience of sea slugs: "I don't see why it should receive any special priority."

This refusal to deal with the human reached its apogee with a project called the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit [CCRU], which has just seen its papers from 1997-2003 republished by the cult philosophy imprint Urbanomics. CCRU texts read like a mash-up of William Gibson, Steam Punk and Timothy Leary — exactly what a lot of bright young graduates imagined Nietzsche might sound like if he listened to Dubstep rather than Wagner. The influence of Nietzsche is also apparent in the group's belief that the "weak" are holding back the "strong." CCRU argued that the institutions comprising the establishment of government, academia and the established sciences are a deadening weight, and to break out we need to encourage "an accelerated culture" where new ideas could flourish.

Fast forward to the present-day, and CCRU's accelerationism connects with a belief in Silicon Valley that markets need to be fast-moving and tech must be disruptive. Moldbug is reported to be funded by the PayPal founder Peter Thiel, who also backed Trump's campaign, and Moldbug is also said to have the ear of Steve Bannon. Land does not have this kind of access, and the similarity between Bannon and Land may be little more than a shared excitement for all things huge and fast. In a Bloomberg profile, Bannon almost sinks into CCRU-speak as he describes the way Breitbart is: "linking to everybody else's stuff, we're aggregating, we'll pull stuff from the left. It's a rolling phenomenon. Huge traffic. Everybody's invested." Compare this with a breathless sentence from Nick, praising the "largest discrete event in human history" unfolding "with frequent cross-fertilisations, through dizzy ascents and calamitous plunges that track the rise, fall, and renaissance of the modernist spirit." This turns out to be a PR piece praising Shanghai as the perfect location for the 2010 World Expo.

For most of the members of CCRU, Cybernetics was a fun way to praise the internet and write science fiction. For Nick, however, it was always about thinking a world that was cyber in the sense of post-human. Nick's hatred of liberal institutions did not end at universities. He also loathed the language of human rights and human values—the values that exists to explain and defend democracy, the United Nations, and ideas like universal jurisdiction. Land recognised that the notion of universal laws and rights flow from the guiding idea of the Enlightenment: we all part of humanity. He sought to debunk it.

Today, the right-wing critique of liberal humanism forms the entirety of Nick's work, which he terms the Dark Enlightenment. There have always been conservative figures operating within an Enlightenment tradition that have attacked its key ideas, from Burke, through Carlyle, to 20th-century figures like Martin Heidegger, Leo Strauss, Leszek Kolakowski, or England's own John Gray. But these thinkers have also always been appalled by change and speed, where Nick embraces it. In his version of the Dark Enlightenment it is vain to imagine a human sensibility capable of being damaged or appalled by the speed of modern life. I can imagine him crying: let's all be more like rats!

This kind of black humour will always put Nick Land at the edge of conservative thought. Nick is feted by the alt-right and identifies with the term, though he has also said that "alt-" means "ironic." But if he is determinedly weird, he is also surprisingly mainstream. We are very close to abandoning the notion of Human Rights. Governments are losing patience with humanism, whether paternalist states like China, ethno-nationalist states like Israel, authoritarian states like Russia and Turkey, or the US which guards its exceptionalism so closely. Even the idea of the human as something universal we all share is under attack: witness popular bestsellers like Yuval Harari's Homo Sapiens that argues that there are different kinds of humans, not one, and the term "human" will soon be obsolete.

The question is, what replaces the human? Ethno-nationalism is clearly a big part of the answer for many politicians and voters, as parties offering nativism, racism, protectionism and apartheid are enjoying popular support. The notion of a Dark Enlightenment feeds off the liberal Enlightenment. To me the real miracle is that consensus and communication exists despite all the violence and division in the world. But for some—and I mean over-excited man-childs—the shattering of the world into tribes and interest groups is a moment of reality. This is the Naked Lunch when we see exactly what is at the end of our forks as William Burroughs, another immature genius, once wrote.

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